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ABSTRACT

The author quotes the statement that the primary goal of the Research and Development Program on Reading is to "produce functional reading competence on the part of all persons reading age 10." In evaluating this goal, he considers it to be questionable for several reasons. First, there is no high correlation between reading ability at the age of 10 and ultimate academic success. Second, fourth-grade reading ability is not sufficient for most adult reading tasks, thus the standard is not realistic. Studies of Dale, Gray, and Ojeman demonstrated that adults with less than fifth-grade schooling tended to regress in reading ability, while those with more than 5 years tended to maintain or improve. They also observed a low relationship between the last school grade attended and reading ability as an adult. Third, there is a conflict between the goal and the proposed research. The goal is the production of functional literacy for all the population, but the research will concern itself with inventing a new way of teaching developmental reading that will function only up to the fourth grade. And finally, the program also faces the problem of inventing an omnipotent method of instruction effective for all the school population. References are included. (AW)

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The Research and Development Program on Reading

by George D. Spache

Let us first consider the primary goal of the Research and Development Program on Reading. As you have heard, this goal is to produce "functional reading competence on the part of all persons reading age ten", i.e. in all reading skills necessary for an individual for a reading performance comparable to that of ten year olds. What are the implications of this statement of the goal of the Research and Development Program?

1. That a fourth grade reading performance will be predictive of success in adult reading tasks of all types. Note - We are not accusing these planners at this moment of saying that fourth grade reading skills are all that any adult need acquire for adult reading tasks, but simply drawing the obvious implication that they believe that if a child reaches functional competence at the fourth grade level, he will eventually be successful with adult reading tasks.

The choice of fourth grade as a lower limit of reading ability is not an unreasonable one, for throughout the world it is generally recognized that this is the boundary line between functional literacy and crippling illiteracy. In the sense that such a level of performance would eliminate illiteracy and contribute to vocational adequacy, this goal is realistic in proposing a minimum level of reading ability.

In the sense of dividing between illiterates and functional literates, the fourth grade ability level is certainly acceptable. On the other hand, I

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know of no longitudinal studies which indicate that there is a high correlation between reading ability at the age of ten and ultimate scholastic and academic success. In contradiction, we see the British dropping their eleven-year-old examinations because of their lack of predictive accuracy for later scholastic or vocational performance.

2. That the acquisition of fourth grade reading skills is sufficient for most adult reading tasks is a second implication which may be derived from the Research and Development Program's goal statement. Whether this implication is justified, depends upon one's interpretation of the real, but unstated, goals of the Research and Development Program. Is this a program really intended to eradicate illiteracy in America by finding ways and means of producing minimal reading competence for all the population? Or, is this a program that intends to effect ordinary developmental reading instruction so that it will produce, at least, a minimum competence for all the population?

It is quite clear from the descriptions of the proposed program that its real goal is not the eradication of present illiteracy but the improvement of instructional procedures and practices to the point that they will produce functional literacy for all pupils. Presumably illiteracy would thus disappear in the population, and this is undoubtedly an implied goal to be accomplished in the next twenty years.

But what concerns us is the inherent implication that, in the minds of the directors and planners of this program, fourth grade reading ability is adequate training for most adult reading tasks. I am certain the Research and Development planners will immediately disclaim this implication, just

as I am certain that most of the members of this audience would violently object to such a standard of reading performance as highly predictive of or sufficient for adult reading success.

But despite these disclaimers and objections the implications are still there in the statement of the goal. If fourth grade reading ability is not really sufficient for future reading tasks, then how can the standard be justified? If many pupils will need more than fourth grade reading skills, why are these individual differences ignored?

As a matter of fact, several early studies of adult reading raise serious doubts about the adequacy of fourth grade reading ability for adult reading tasks. Gray and Leary's study and those by Ojemann and Dale and Tyler,* all demonstrated that adults with less than fifth grade schooling tended to regress in reading ability, while those with more than five years tended to maintain or improve in reading skills. How realistic then is a goal of producing fourth grade reading ability?

*Dale, Edgar and Tyler, Ralph W., "A Study of the Factors Influencing the Difficulty of Reading Materials for Adults of Limited Reading Ability," Library Quarterly, 4 (July 1934) 394-412.

Gray, William S. and Leary, Bernice E., What Makes a Book Readable? Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1935.

Ojemann, Ralph, "The Reading Ability of Parents and Factors Associated with Reading Difficulty of Parent-Education Materials," Researches in Parent Education, University of Iowa Studies in Child Welfare, 8 (March 1, 1934) 11-32.

Another pertinent observation in these three studies was low relationship between the last school grade attended and reading ability as an adult. How, then, can we consider fourth grade reading ability adequate for adult reading tasks?

Is the statement of the goal of the Research and Development Program really consonant with the description of the research activities proposed? I think you will agree that there is a conflict between the goal and the proposed research. The goal is in truth the production of functional literacy for all the population. The research, however, will concern itself with inventing a new and different way of teaching developmental reading that will function only up to the fourth grade. What model or definition of the reading process, what description of developmental reading are you familiar with - that stops short at the fourth grade? What sort of a primary reading program could conceivably be invented that would ignore its foundational relationship to the new, technical reading skills that must be learned in dealing with materials beyond fourth garde level? Are we dealing here with planners whose definition of reading is that it is simply a decoding process, implying that training in critical reading, skimming, scanning, and the different skills demanded by various content fields need not be taught?

3. The goal implies that the reading instruction program will be effective for all the school population. The breadth of this goal statement offers other implications or should I call them assumptions? There is, first, the assumption, derived possibly from the use of the convergence technique in medical studies, that a method of instruction can be designed

which will cure all our reading ills. In other words, we are asked to believe that by carefully converging all our research toward that one goal - a panacea for any causes of reading retardation will be found.

I greatly fear that, if the intensive research of the literature on reading methodology is carefully done, as the plan suggests, these researchers may question this possibility of an omnipotent method being discovered or created. What conceivable program of instruction could control the major variables which condition pupil success in reading, such as the professional preparation and enthusiasm of the teacher; the handicaps imposed by bilingualism, language deprivation or substandard dialect; the influence of the cognitive style of the learner and of the learning modality employed; or the significance of visual or auditory or cross-modality deficits? What method of reading instruction will be invented that will control the variables of socio-economic status, peer status, self-concept, teaching style and classroom climate, etc.? Even a cursory reading of the primary reading studies sponsored by the Office of Education during the period from 1964-69 yields the contradictory evidence that these variables - not method or materials - are the major determiners in learning to read.

There are certainly other questions that may be raised regarding this plan. One of these is expressed by Jacobs and Felix (3) in this quotation:

> "The thought that billion-dollar expenditures for education may be contingent in part upon the rise of tested pupil achievement makes one wish more confidence could be placed in such measures both in terms of their proper use and interpretation and of their relevance in measuring important educational outcomes." (3 p. 19)

Douglas G. Ellson of Indiana University has further criticized the Targeted Research and Development Program as it was presented in a descriptive paper by William J. Gephart in a recent issue of the Reading Research Quarterly. (1) To summarize them briefly, some of Ellson's criticisms were:

1. It is not really an example of the convergence technique, as it claims to be, for it goes beyond the planning of the research function which is the intended goal of the convergence technique. The Targeted Research and Development Program includes not only research but also the design and testing of an instructional system, the procedures for delivery of this system, and a strategy for using this system to promote educational change.

2. Yet, despite its additional components of development and dissemination, the Targeted Research and Development Program plan makes little or no mention of the resources needed to implement the entire plan. Ellson considers this a crucial omission in Gephart's overview article for, he points out, this plan may grow to such dimensions that it might monopolize most of the money for research in reading; and in the effort to invent a single instructional super-system stifle all other reading research development.

3. Ellson considers, as we do, the statement of the goal as ambiguous. Is fourth grade reading performance to be considered predictive for adult reading tasks? Is fourth grade a crucial level or is it not possible that the objective of preparing all pupils for adult reading tasks may have no relationship to their performances at the fourth grade?

4. The emphasis upon invention of a new instructional program ignores the possibility that some current programs could, under suitable conditions, produce far more achievement than they do at present. Perhaps more attention should be paid to the conditions under which some present programs are successful rather than to finding a new approach which presumably will supplant all existing systems.

Gephart answers these criticisms, for the most part fairly well, by pointing out that: (2)

1. the convergence technique can be expanded to include development as well as research
2. that existing instructional practices will be examined and tried out in special research projects to determine whether thay can produce the goal of the Targeted Research and Development Program
3. that probable costs of the program in 5635 man-years and 292 million dollars in a twenty-year period are included in the total report. (However, he does not answer Ellson's question whether this represents a large or a small proportion of all the money available for reading research during this period. Gephart's answer that because many professionals would be involved, this project could not dominate all reading research is not an adequate answer.)

Finally, Gephart acknowledges the ambiguity in the goal statement, but repeats that aim in saying that the direct goal is the education of children so that by the age of 10 they will have acquired the reading skills necessary for the successful performance of significant adult reading tasks. This goal is a dubious one, as we have tried to point out.

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3. Jacobs, James N. and Felix, Joseph L. "Testing the Educational and Psychological Development of Pre-Adolescent Children - Ages 6-12," Review of Educational Research, 38 (February 1968) 19-28.